

June 5, 2009 - Pentagon Faces \$2.5 Billion Budget Shortfall

USA Today

www.usatoday.com

Pentagon faces \$2.5 billion budget shortfall

By Tom Vanden Brook, USA TODAY

June 5, 2009

WASHINGTON

— The faster-than-expected growth in the size of the military has forced the Pentagon to overspend its budget and seek an extra \$1.6 billion from Congress to make up for it.

House budget officials have included the money in a supplemental war-time spending bill to help the Pentagon pay troops it has recruited two years faster than planned, because of the weak economy and the need for forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. The bill will be voted on in coming days.

Rep. John Murtha, the Pennsylvania Democrat who chairs the House defense appropriations subcommittee, says the emergency request reflects poor planning at the Pentagon. The military needs another \$900 million to fund a pay raise approved by Congress, and increases in housing and retirement costs for troops. All told, the shortfall is \$2.5 billion.

"I heard rumblings for months about a problem, and I'm

disappointed it took the (Defense) Department so long to let us know how much of a shortfall they face," he said. "This shortfall has to be addressed and fortunately we were able to put money in the supplemental to work it out."

Despite exceeding the budget, the Army has been eager to expand because of the strain caused by fighting two wars for more than six years.

Most of the deficit is because the faltering economy boosted recruiting and retention and cut the number of troops planning to leave the service, said Navy Cmdr. Darryn James, a Pentagon spokesman.

That, James said, meant the size of all services grew "faster than projected even just a few months ago."

Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced in 2007 a plan to add 65,000 soldiers to the Army for a total of 547,000 by 2012. The Army now has 548,655 soldiers, records show.

The 2007 plan also called for adding 27,000 Marines to bring the size of the Corps to 202,000 by 2012. There are now 201,831 Marines.

The Army, which shoulders most of the burden of fighting the wars, needs the extra soldiers.

Gen. Peter Chiarelli, vice chief of staff of the Army, told senators in April that the Army uses soldiers as quickly as it trains them.

"Overall, we are consuming our readiness as fast as we are building it," he said. The entire Army, from soldiers to families to support systems, is strained by multiple combat tours and not enough time to recover, he said.

Worsening matters, he said, are the growing number of soldiers who can't deploy for combat because of wounds or other issues. There are now about 30,000 such soldiers, Chiarelli said.

There are about 130,000 U.S. servicemembers in Iraq and 54,000 in Afghanistan. By fall, 68,000 servicemembers are to be in Afghanistan.